The exhumation of Lee Harvey Oswald — a macabre footnote to history — has not stilled the theorists

18 Years Of Conspiracies

By Dan Carmichael
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DALLAS — An eerie silence enveloped the room as debris from Lee Harvey Oswald's rotted wooden coffin was removed and his body lifted onto a gleaming stainless steel autopsy table.

Oswald's receding hairline was clearly visible on the skull and most of his black hair remained even after 18 years. About 80 percent of the body was skeletal remains, about 20 percent decomposed tissue.

A strong musty smell permeated the room and some of the attorneys witnessing the macabre proceedings looked a bit nauseated.

Dr. Linda Norton, head of a crack team of pathologists, first examined Oswald's left hand. She quickly discovered what she was looking for and removed two gold rings. They were quickly cleaned and she slipped them into a pocket of her green surgical "scrubs" and rushed to a nearby room where Marina Oswald Porter was nervously waiting.

It was Porter's most emotional moment.

Porter took a deep breath, steadied herself and then confirmed that the gold Russian band and the second ring, containing a red ruby, were slipped onto Oswald's left pinkie finger on Nov. 25, 1963, just before his coffin was lowered into the ground.

Porter looked like she might cry, although she managed not to.

Dr. Norton asked Porter if she wanted the rings.

"I don't want them — I don't want them at all," Porter said. "You can have them."

Dr. Norton said, "I don't want them at all. I'll put them back in the coffin."

Porter turned to Janis Scroggins — secretary to her lead attorney, Jerry Pittman — and asked, "Do you think I did the right thing?"

Scroggins said, "Marina, if you felt you had to do this for your children's sake, no one else needs any more justification or reason."

Back in the autopsy room, the medical team discovered a hole that had been drilled in Oswald's mastoid bone when Oswald was 6 years old. At that point there was little doubt in anyone's mind that no Russian agent had been buried instead of Oswald.

A detailed series of dental and jawbone examinations also were performed. For four hours, the medical team conducted painstaking and precise tests before announcing that the body in the grave — exhumed on Oct. 4, 1981 — was the same Lee Harvey Oswald that had been buried 18 years earlier. The rings matched, the mastoid indentation was in the correct place, and, most importantly, the dental X-rays, charts and fillings were perfect matches.

It was the end of a three-year legal battle to have the body exhumed. The technological preciseness of 1980s medical science had disproven the theory of British author Michael Eddowes that a Soviet agent had assumed Oswald's identity after his defection to Moscow in 1959 and returned in his place to assassinate President John F. Kennedy.

EDDOWES HAD built a convincing case — based on declassified government documents — for a secret, government-sponsored exhumation. The FBI, CIA, Warren Commission and Justice Department had all been discussing an exhumation for six months after the assassination. Then, suddenly, the discussions stopped and there was no further mention of the issue.

Porter was also suspicious. She recalled that in 1964, she was asked by government agents to allow the installation of an alarm system to protect the grave. She signed a document authorizing the installation but learned several years later, when the tombstone was stolen, that no alarm had ever been installed.

Now that the exhumation has been done, the people who have become known as "assassination buffs" make it plain that they are not about to quit.

Most of them were skeptical of Eddowes' theory from the start — believing a secret exhumation was possible but unlikely. Most theorized that if a body were unearthed, it would be Lee Harvey Oswald's.

Now, many of them fear that because Eddowes' theory was discredited, the public will have little time for some serious inconsistencies they have discovered in support of a claim of conspiracy.

Many of the more prominent assassination "buffs" were mystified at why Eddowes' theory got such media coverage and felt it was diverting attention from much more fruitful areas of discovery.

Dr. Paul L. Hoch of the University of California, Berkeley, has researched the case since 1964.

"It's challenging and interesting research work," he said, "and at the very least — even if we don't solve the assassination — the research has led us to understand much more about how the government works and how the country works."

Hoch said, "I was never able to take Eddowes' stuff seriously. It was far-fetched and consisted of rather strained logic. I always felt, though, that Eddowes had a hypothesis you couldn't disprove (unless the body were exhumed). I am surprised that Eddowes now appears to be admitting he is wrong. He could have said, 'Well, the KGB switched the dental records, too.' " (*)

Hoch said he hopes the public will now pay attention to "the more serious theories. When you use the term 'conspiracy theory,' you must remember that the House Select Committee on Assassinations — a serious investigation by a serious panel — came up with evidence it concluded showed a conspiracy by analyzing the recorded gunfire sounds. But nothing

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happens — the Justice Department seems very uninterested in pursuing it."

Hoch said if the media "put one-tenth of the effort into tracking down some of the leads as it did with the Eddowes case, we'd know a lot more right now. It's important to get additional evidence — people are out there, witnesses, who have never been talked to.

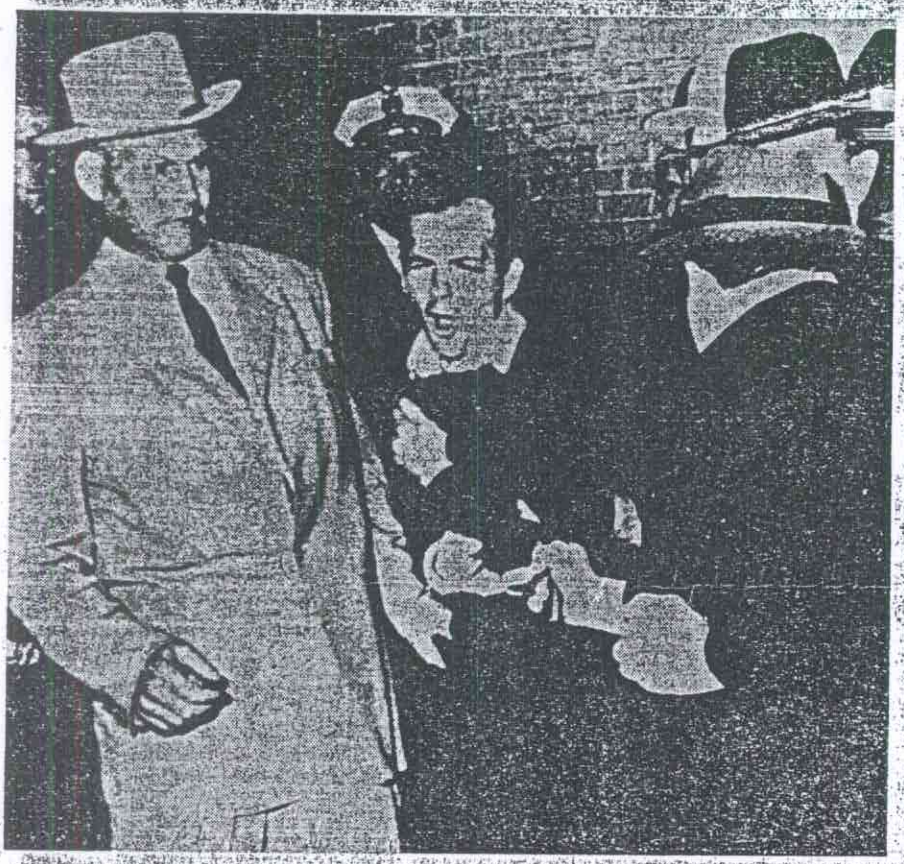
"I'm a document man. There are still documents that I think would be productive but which remain classified. The CIA began processing its 'last' batch of assassination documents several years ago and they have not been released yet. I first started asking for those documents in 1976."

Hoch said, "I'm quite convinced there was a conspiracy. When you look at (Jack) Ruby's background, you're looking at organized crime. My inclination is that something broader was involved — along the lines that elements of organized crime and intelligence and anti-Castro Cubans came together."

Hoch also claims there is evidence that Kennedy's body was "tampered with" after the assassination to alter the physical evidence.

"It has been well established that the body didn't go directly from Dallas to Bethesda," he said. "There is evidence that it was switched at some point from the ceremonial casket into a plain shipping casket. There are good witnesses who saw the shipping casket and

(*) Not only did I not say "unless the body were exhumed," I did not mean that. PLH



just thought it was a security measure. When the Kennedy autopsy began, one of the doctors said there had been surgery to the head area. The description of the Dallas wound is different from the Washington wound. I am now convinced the body was tampered with."

WILLIAM PENN JONES, 66, lives on a farm outside Dallas. For 29 years he ran a weekly newspaper and was in Dallas to cover Kennedy at the

unmen who fired one shot to Dallas, then loaded into he Atlantic Ocean'

time of the assassination. Jones edits a monthly newsletter on the assassination, "Continuing Inquiry," started in 1975.

He said his first doubts about what happened in Dealey Plaza were formed when he heard what type of rifle was allegedly used to kill Kennedy. A World War II veteran, he said, "No one in his right mind would use that rifle to even go rabbit hunting.

"I knew something was wrong. I couldn't understand why the shots would be fired as Kennedy was heading away from Oswald, down and to the right. That's a very difficult shot. Then to have Oswald shot by a police pimp was just too much for me to swallow.

"I have names. The man is still alive today who told the FBI in Dallas beforehand that Kennedy would be assassinated. He's living in San Antonio, Texas, and he still sticks by what he told me. The FBI told him, 'You're a kook' and slammed down the phone."

Jones said, "Coups have been going on for a thousand years. At the time Kennedy was shot, the U.S. had a complete infantry team in the air in case any opposition had to be stamped out. They could have been an effective fighting force anywhere in the nation in two hours. But those troops were not needed because the media instantly bought the 'lone nut' theory. Those troops landed that night in Austin, Texas, and had a hot dinner."

Jones said, "I think there were nine gunmen who fired one shot each. The gunmen were flown into Dallas from Oklahoma, were then loaded into a plane at Redbird Airport and then the plane was dumped into the Atlantic Ocean. You've always got to kill the killers and this is a textbook case. You just can't afford to watch them all their lives to make sure they don't talk."

Jones said the killing will never be solved, "because the mass media is not doing their job, the courts are not doing their job and there's not a lawyer I know who's really working on the case. Only us 'nuts' work on it.

"If the Zapruder film (of the shooting) had been shown on national television that weekend in 1963, the public would have realized the shots came from the front. But it was years before it was ever shown, and now it's too late."

IN DALLAS, an elderly woman who was on Elm Street when Kennedy was shot has compiled the world's largest collection of assassination books and documents outside the National Archives.

Every document is indexed and cross-indexed. She asked that her name not be used, because she does not want a public profile.

"I have always believed Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone," she said.

Explaining her involvement, she said she was on Elm Street when the shots were fired and heard a description of the alleged assassin broadcast over a police radio within minutes. It said he was 'about 30, wearing a white shirt, khaki pants, about 160 pounds.' I thought, 'Half the men in Dallas fit that description. They'll never find him.'

"Then, one hour and one minute later they capture a suspect all the way across town in a movie theater. I thought, 'The Dallas police must have ESP.' Then I learned he was not wearing a white shirt, he was 22, not 30, he was about 130 pounds, not 160, and he was not wearing khaki trousers.

"I immediately put my husband and children on the loading docks of the Dallas newspapers and for the next four days we gathered every newspaper and magazine we could. I started indexing names of witnesses and I've never stopped since. The more I read, the more I was convinced it didn't happen like I was told it did."